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GEORG BRANDES IN LIFE AND LETTERS

BY JULIUS MORITZEN

AT certain periods in the life of any man who has attained fame it is customary to glance in retrospect across the years that have gone to the making of the sum total of his recognized achievement. In the case of some noted writer it may be the twenty-fifth anniversary of literary activity that furnishes the incentive for a reëxamination of endeavor. Or perhaps the attaining of his three-score and ten brings renewed publicity to bear on an author with international reputation. Again, it may remain for Father Time to wield his scythe before the public comes to a full realization of what such a personality meant to his generation.

In the case of Georg Brandes, whose eightieth birthday occurs on February 4, not only is he still among the living and in the full possession of all his remarkable faculties, but the honors paid him on November 3 last, on account of the fiftieth anniversary of his first lecture at the University of Copenhagen, proved a most impressive demonstration of how this noted critic is valued in his home country. It is not to be overlooked that on that memorable occasion half a century ago, when Brandes first appeared on the University lecture platform and expounded ideas that were widely looked upon with horror, the man who to-day is considered worthy to be classed with Sainte-Beuve and Taine was nothing less than anathema in the eyes of the conservatives. The torchlight procession of November 3, however, the great tributes paid to him who is now hailed as Master, the address by Brandes himself when he spoke on Homer in his own inimitable manner, all went to show that a prophet after all is sometimes honored in his own land.

One of the interesting features of this celebration was the spontaneity with which men of all religious, political and literary creeds hailed him as the forerunner of that Liberalism which now characterizes Danish affairs. As a matter of fact, Brandes needs no

apologist at this late day. From the first appearance of his *Dualism in Our Newest Philosophy*, written at the age of twenty-one, to the publication of *Michelangelo*, his writings have been landmarks in European literary history. In America, he is perhaps best known as the author of *William Shakespeare, a Critical Study*. This, naturally enough, may be due to the fact that for some years this book has been available in English.

Few writers of any period or any country have done more than Brandes toward clarifying historical facts by means of picturesque description. He was only twenty years old when he was awarded the gold medal of the University of Copenhagen for his essay dealing with the fatalistic tendencies among the ancients. Philosophy and æsthetics were his particular studies. The lucidity of his style and the delightful manner in which he could convert any dry-as-dust subject into something entertaining was out of the ordinary at that day, and surprised the staid pedagogues of the University not a little. In reality, from the very earliest time he had to assume the defensive. He had opened a new vein, but it was for him to prove that the ore brought to the surface was pure and indestructible.

Obtaining his doctor's degree, Brandes spent several years in travel. It was then that he met such men as Mill, Taine, and Renan, whose influence on that particular period was indisputable. Nor did they fail to impress a mind which like his was receptive to a degree. Their progressive ideals appealed wonderfully to this young Dane, who early became familiar with the leading languages of Europe and who thus was able to investigate for himself the literary treasures of the various countries. It goes without saying that without his knowledge of the English language he could never have produced a work like his *Shakespeare*. And the same can be said with respect to his *Goethe*, *Voltaire*, *Julius Cæsar* and *Michelangelo*.

It was on his return to Denmark, when he was not yet thirty, that Brandes began to deliver at the University of Copenhagen the series of lectures which did nothing less than revolutionize history-teaching in northern Europe. He humanized epochal events, by centering the attention upon this or that great personality. The fruits of this series of lectures we find incorporated in

his *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature*. Delivered over a period of more than ten years, these lectures furnish perhaps one of the best accounts extant concerning the subject.

Going back, then, to the time of the German-Danish war of the 'sixties, we find Brandes working with might and main to raise the Danes from the intellectual stupor into which they were gradually falling as a result of the loss of Schleswig. Bad as it was that the province had been lost to the country, he declared with emphasis that it was not a time to sit down and mourn. He stirred up his countrymen to a realization of the fact that they had their own intellectual house to put in order. He fought self-sufficiency at home with every instrument at his command. He never doubted that some day the great wrong done to Denmark would be righted. But he did not believe in the impossible. Chauvinism has no abiding place with him. It was no fault of his that he was misunderstood with regard to Danish neutrality or the return of Schleswig. Always he has stood the loyal champion of the South Jutlanders in their desire to rejoin the mother country. The Schleswig plebiscite, with its happy result, owes much more to him than is ordinarily known.

The literary career of Georg Brandes extends over a period of more than sixty years. From 1866 to the present time his range of production touches almost every subject of literary importance. He reveals his purpose as a writer in the concluding chapter of his *Shakespeare*:

Even a long human life is so brief and fugitive that it seems little short of a miracle that it can leave traces behind which endure through the centuries. The millions die and sink into oblivion and their deeds die with them. A thousand so far conquer death as to leave their names to be a burden to the memories of school-children, but convey little else to posterity. But some few master-minds remain; among them Shakespeare ranks with Leonardo. He was hardly laid in his grave when he rose from it again. Of all the names of this earth, none is more certain of immortality than that of Shakespeare.

It is in the identical spirit that Brandes treated Shakespeare that previously he wrote of such commanding figures as Disraeli, Lassalle, Ibsen, Heine, Björnson, and the many personalities that go to make up the galaxy in his *Men of the Modern Transition*. The Great War brought renewed interest to bear on his *Impressions of*

Russia and Impressions of Poland, written more than thirty years ago. Students of events in those countries to-day may find considerable profit in comparing Brandes's impressions with what he had to say more recently about the people of those nations. He certainly did not remain silent following the overthrow of the Czar and the coming of the revolution. He is as much against the red Bolshevism of Russia as against the obstructive policies of those who call themselves "white" in those lands. Before the recent change in Soviet-ruled Russia he delivered himself of the following, which is not without its significance to-day:

The more completely Europe lets Russia alone, the more readily Europe allows the Russian Republic to put its own house in order, the quicker will the Russians view Europe in its right perspective and let the European nations do what they think is best for them. It is the experience of history that any political agitation left alone by the world at large becomes tempered gradually, loses its particular stamp of violence, and actually changes from within, so that it more and more balances in the scale with its surroundings.

Is it not a fact that something to the above effect is actually taking place in Russia, even though the outside world has not entirely kept aloof from Russian national affairs? As for Brandes's internationalism, nearly thirty-three years before the World War he made certain pertinent references to the Germany of the future which bear repeating now:

The love of liberty, in the English sense, is to be found in Germany only among men of the generation which within ten years will have disappeared. And when that time comes Germany will lie alone, isolated, hated by the neighboring countries; a stronghold of conservatism in the centre of Europe. Around it, in Italy, in France, in Russia, in the North, there will arise a generation imbued with international ideas and eager to carry them out in life. But Germany will lie there, old and half stifled in her coat of mail, armed to the teeth, and protected by all the weapons of murder and defense which science can invent.

Passing from the domain of political internationalism to that of books, it is interesting to find how the American visit of Georg Brandes in 1914, shortly before the Great War, focused attention on his *Shakespeare*. Much could be written about this visit, which brought the American people face to face with a personality that quickly found himself at home with the Western spirit. Indeed, a unique connection was seen between this modern in-

terpreter of the Melancholy Dane of Shakespeare and that Hamlet who has sent the fame of Denmark throughout the world.

In one of his American lectures, Brandes declared that the character of Hamlet is the true picture of the mind of Shakespeare at the time he wrote the drama:

In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare puts the cloak of motley on his own shoulders. He well understood the value of indirect expression, and the fact that wisdom cuts deeper when thrown out as folly. Shakespeare lived all Hamlet's experiences. Shortly before writing the drama his father had died,—not by assassination, it is true; and his mother had not degraded herself,—but the patron of his youth, Southampton and Essex, had died; the woman he loved had proved false and heartless, a friend had conspired against him with this woman, and his prospects of winning the poet's wreath were slim. At first he was submissive under these misfortunes. He was stunned. Later he took his revenge incognito through the scathing invective of *Hamlet*. He makes Hamlet speak not as a prince but, as when he speaks of the "oppressor's scorn" and the "proud man's contumely", in the manner of one who has been outraged by the sight of stupidity lording it in high places. The bright view of life which characterized his youth was overcast, and his disappointment voices itself in Hamlet's expression of weariness of life.

There seems to be something of a Hamlet in Brandes's very way of looking at humankind. To get at the analogy, however, it is necessary to go back to his earlier writings, to review once more his battles for recognition, his friendships and the many enemies he made when first he broke a lance with conservatism and "the stupidity lording it in high places". It is this word "stupidity" that occurs and recurs again and again in the writings of Brandes. He loathes the very thought of mankind undermining its own usefulness because it refuses to think for itself and use common sense. As for finding the true Georg Brandes as he reveals himself to-day it is necessary to go to his *Michelangelo*.

It is impossible here to treat in detail of the various productions of Brandes; it must be sufficient merely to mention the great array that includes, besides the books already referred to, such other works as *Æsthetic Studies*, *Criticisms and Portraits*, *Men and Works in the Newer European Literature*, *Ludvig Holberg*, *Danish Personalities*, *Foreign Personalities*, *Foreign Regions and Personalities*, *Youthful Poems*, *Autobiography*, *Bird Perspective*, etc., and finally, the great companion pieces to *Shakespeare*:—

Goethe, Voltaire, Cæsar and Michelangelo. His *Goethe* appeared in 1915, and Brandes says that it was largely due to the war and his involuntary stay at home that he was able to complete those two massive volumes. No ardent Frenchman, whatever his criticism of the Danish writer for his neutral attitude during the war, could possibly find fault with the manner in which Goethe is presented here. In fact, the philosophic calm of the great German poet as the Fatherland was invaded by foreign armies is emphasized further by Brandes who writes as follows:

Goethe by no means saw in Napoleon the demolisher of the German Fatherland. He had never known such a Fatherland. On July 27, 1807, he wrote that he could not hide his impatience when people bewailed the loss of something that not one person in Germany knew anything about. He did not look upon foreign domination as a disgrace. On the contrary, in the place of numerous small states, badly ruled, there had come a smaller number governed more in the modern spirit, in consonance with the principles of the French Revolution, which first now impressed him as they were embodied in a great personality. . . . Goethe's lack of interest in the so-called War of Liberation did hurt the nation's sensibilities. Perhaps the war was for the purpose of gaining national independence, but on the other hand it brought back the entire reaction of the past. Hence his words: "They do this to no purpose. The man is too big for them."

Brandes says that there was something in Goethe's nature which precluded him from ever becoming popular. He was too big and unapproachable to be valued by more than a minority. As for the Goethe-worship, exemplified in the reverence shown him in the years following the Revolution of 1848, Brandes writes that it was not until the establishment of the German Empire that it took hold in earnest. "Not until after that event was the worship of Germany's foremost mind made part of the national system."

Brandes's relations with intellectual Germany dates back to the time when he left Denmark as a protest against a certain opposition which felt itself in danger because of the pronounced liberalism of the young scholar who had expected to succeed to the chair of *Æsthetics* at the University on the death of the then incumbent. Remaining in Germany several years, Brandes quickly established himself among the literary notables of the southern country. His familiarity with German literature and his remarkable treatment of Goethe as man and scholar are easily

traceable to that period. In the same connection it is worth mentioning that years ago the University of Copenhagen through its highest functionaries acknowledged that it did wrong in not offering him the *Æsthetic* professorship when Brandes desired it. This sentiment was expressed once more during the recent celebration when Professor J. L. Heiberg on behalf of the University referred to the injustice done the noted Dane.

It is unquestionably a fact that Brandes's literary predilections are favorable to the French. For this reason it was to be expected that in his *Voltaire* he would give free rein to his great admiration for the people with whom he has so many things in common. As in the case of Goethe, so Brandes for many years had occupied himself with the French cynic. He draws an interesting comparative picture of the two intellectual giants, as follows:

Goethe and Voltaire resemble each other very little with regard to their mental make-ups; they are alike in that intensity and universality that gave them dominion in the intellectual world. In science, Voltaire was a mere disseminator of ideas. He was a scholar, but did not create, as did Goethe. His grounding in mathematics stood him in good stead in his investigations. This Goethe lacked. But Voltaire, as a physicist, lacked Goethe's independence, and yet, in contrast to his gifted successor on the throne of literature, he abounded in that hard, sound sense which enabled him to grasp the real value of Newton's theories. In his case, in fact, human knowledge was developed to such a degree of clarity and brilliancy that it became the equivalent to genius. And in his writing of history he was undoubtedly Goethe's superior. His *History of Charles XII* and *Essays on Moral* were epochal in their effect.

Pages could be written about Brandes's *Julius Cæsar*, which is an entirely different Cæsar from him whom Shakespeare pictures. Brandes says:

It was because of Shakespeare's lack of historical and classical culture that the incomparable grandeur of the figure of Cæsar left him unmoved. He depressed and debased the figure to make room for the development of the central character in his drama,—to wit, Marcus Brutus, whom, following Plutarch's idealizing example, he depicted as a Stoic of almost flawless nobility. Brutus had to be the centre and pivot of everything, Cæsar was therefore diminished and belittled to such a degree, unfortunately, that this matchless genius in war and statesmanship becomes a miserable caricature. Generation after generation has been educated to see in Cæsar the representative of lust of power, in Brutus the hero of liberty. That honor fell to the weakest head among those surrounding Cæsar.

In *Michelangelo* there is so much of Brandes himself that it is quite apparent that in no other book can we gain a better insight into the idiosyncrasies of the Danish scholar. His estimate of Michelangelo is set forth succinctly in the following sentence: "In 1871, when for the first time I stepped within the Sistine Chapel, I told myself: 'At last you are in the presence of that mind which of all mind-forces has struck deepest into your soul.'" It is in this spirit that the book is written. Many of the obstacles that confronted Michelangelo in his long and strenuous career, the envy that met him at every point and attempted to belittle his achievements, his indomitable will power and his creative genius, find their counterparts in much that Brandes experienced before the world finally acknowledged his genius. Faced by a bibliography that for more than four hundred years had occupied itself with Michelangelo, Brandes set to work to add his own interpretation to the many that had gone before. This in itself was no small task. But it seems quite certain that the Danish writer considered himself in duty bound to pay this tribute to the man who had influenced his life-work so decidedly. How Brandes understands the art of making environment effective in leading up to characterization of personality we learn at the very beginning of the book, where he writes:

When to-day one visits Florence for the first time, it is customary, in order to obtain a good view of the city, to take a drive along the Via dei Colli, the road which twists in and out like some broad winding stairway, up the hills where Michelangelo built fortifications for the defense of Florence. If the month is May, the tour is through a veritable flower-garden (which gives Florence its name), through an atmosphere fragrant with the scent of thousands upon thousands of roses; and at each turn of the road the vista reveals more and more of the fine and rarified landscape, through which winds the Arno River, and in which, like some mosaic flower in the bottom of a bowl, Florence appears, with its cathedral, with Giotto's bell-tower in black and white marble, with its palaces, equally suited to defense and festival, and with its wonderfully decorated churches and cloisters.

It was on that hill, in 1875, that a great monument in honor of the four hundredth anniversary of Michelangelo's birth was unveiled to Florence's greatest son—the greatest still, even though we do not forget Dante. Here, Michelangelo's David in bronze rests high upon its marble base, and from it extend reclining bronze figures, replicas of Morning, Evening, Day and Night, in the Sacristy of San Lorenzo.

It is a well-known fact that the discovery of Friedrich Nietzsche to the northern nations, if not even to Germany herself, was due to Georg Brandes, who found in this philosopher something so entirely new that he felt he had to make the world acquainted with it. The Nietzsche-Brandes correspondence, available in English, shows to what extent the German scholar realized his indebtedness to his Danish colleague. On Nietzsche's death, in August, 1900, Brandes took occasion to write about him:

To be able to explain Nietzsche's rapid and overwhelming triumph, one would want the key to the secret of the psychological life of our time. He bewitched the age, though he seems opposed to all its instincts. The age is ultra-democratic; he won its favors as an aristocrat. The age is borne on a rising wave of religious reaction; he conquered with his pronounced irreligion. The age is struggling with social questions of the most difficult and far-reaching kind; he, the thinker of the age, left all of these questions on one side as of secondary importance. He was an enemy of the humanitarianism of the present day and its doctrine of happiness. For all that he must in some hidden way have been in accord with much that is fermenting in our time, otherwise it would not have adopted him, as it has done.

With all this, and however much Brandes stood spokesman for Nietzsche, he strenuously denies that he is a disciple of this German superman. "When I became acquainted with him," he wrote some years ago, "I was long past the age at which it is possible to change one's fundamental view of life."

In what has been said here about the works of Georg Brandes the question may easily be asked, as he asked in the case of Nietzsche: What is the value of this man? Are his books interesting? That he has influenced his generation, there is no doubt. One need not be in entire sympathy with his philosophy of life to follow his literary standard and take example from his penetrative faculty for getting at the bottom of things. When present friends and one-time foes unite so wonderfully in paying tribute to the genius of Georg Brandes in his home land, the reason is not far to seek why he stands acclaimed a leader in the world of thought and expression.

JULIUS MORITZEN.